

VZCZCXRO4932  
PP RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHNH  
DE RUEHCHI #0065/01 1071026  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 171026Z APR 06  
FM AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0175  
INFO RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK PRIORITY 0457  
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON PRIORITY 0011  
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 0205  
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU PRIORITY 0025  
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000065

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [TH](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: TEN YEARS AFTER MOVING TO THAILAND, KNU RESISTANCE  
CONTINUES

REF: A. A) BANGKOK 01625

[B](#). B) CHIANG MAI 00049

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[1](#)1. Summary: The Thai-Burma border around Mae Sat in Tak province hosts up to a million ethnic Karen and a large number of Karen exile organizations. The most prominent of these organizations is the Karen National Union (KNU), headquartered in Mae Sot since 1995. No longer as effective or powerful as in the past, the KNU nevertheless remains a force to be reckoned with. A pending USG determination that the KNU is a terrorist entity would play into the Burmese regime's hand and lead to more human rights abuses. End summary

[1](#)2. The KNU, which has resisted the central government in Burma since 1949, defines itself as a political organization whose goal is to protect the Karen people. Even after losing much of its fixed territory inside Burma in 1995, the KNU and its military arm, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), retained a major role in opposition to the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in Rangoon. The Karen is the only major ethnic insurgency in Burma not to sign a cease-fire agreement with the Burmese regime. According to Chiang Mai-based journalist Bertil Lintner, the majority of Karen on both sides of the border view the KNU as their only hope for resisting the Burmese regime.

[1](#)3. At one time the KNU functioned as a de-facto government, funding basic services in Karen territory through tax collection and trade. The Karen Education Department, which administered a network of schools throughout Karen State up to 1995, is now limited to cooperating with NGOs providing education in the Thailand-based refugee camps. The Karen Department of Health and Welfare trained civilian medics and a Mae Sot-based supreme justice presided over local courts in the Karen State.

Thai Government Policy Mixed

[1](#)4. The Thai government attitude toward its large and diverse Karen population - which includes long-time residents of Thailand, migrant workers, exiles opposed to the Burmese military regime, and over 100,000 refugees in camps - is mixed. According to KNU Foreign Secretary David Taw, there is no single Thai "policy" toward the KNU. "The Ministry of Foreign Affairs doesn't know much about the KNU," he said, showing interest only "when the SPDC complains." Although a coordinated policy by Burma and Thailand likely could eliminate the KNU, elements of the Thai military maintain that it is not in their interest to push the KNU into a corner. Sources within the Thai Special Forces confirm their cooperation with the KNLA, noting that policies formulated in Bangkok are often in contradiction with the reality faced by soldiers on the frontline.

¶5. This tacit support for the KNU is a legacy of the historical Thai view of the Karen as long-standing allies who provided a buffer against both the Burmese army and communist insurgents. Prime Minister Thaksin's policy of engagement with the SPDC does not appear to have significantly changed the government's handling of the KNU and related organizations. In fact, the Karen retain standing in the business community as important players in border commerce. A Thai proposal to develop an industrial zone in Karen territory stalled for want of KNU agreement, according to David Taw.

#### Background of the Conflict

¶6. The roots of the Karen resistance predate an independent Burma, with years of grievances on both sides. The Karen's predominantly Christian leadership and World War II allegiance to the British against the Japanese and their Burman allies exacerbated ethnic differences. The Karen were the only major ethnic group to opt out of an agreement that led to Burma's independence in 1948. Less than a year after independence, the Karen's uneasy alliance with the first Burmese government fell apart as communal violence spread.

¶7. During the early years following independence, the Karen engaged in open conflict with the Burmese central government. Prolonged warfare took place throughout Karen State as well as in ethnic Karen areas throughout southern Burma and in the vicinity of Rangoon. In the decades after the military seized power in Rangoon in 1962, however, the Rangoon generals consolidated their power throughout the country. The Burmese army attacked the Karen and other ethnic groups using a strategy known as "Four Cuts:" cutting supply lines, cutting communication between the population and the military, cutting income-producing activities, and cutting off access to new recruits.

#### Human Rights Issues

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¶8. This policy caused the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Karen villagers over the years, creating a large population of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who are vulnerable to rape, disease, and starvation. NGOs such as Karen Human Rights Group and Human Rights Watch have documented systematic abuse against Karen villagers and IDPs, including extra-judicial killing, torture, forced labor, forced relocation, extortion, rape, destruction of property, and land confiscation.

¶9. The Karen have faced charges of human rights violations as well; Amnesty International documented the use of child soldiers, landmines, extra-judicial killings, and torture by the KNLA. KNU contacts admit that these abuses occur, but say that the KNU is actively working to improve their human rights record by educating civilian and military leaders about human rights issues.

#### Cease Fire Talks

¶10. Cease fire talks between the KNU and Rangoon, abandoned after 1995, resumed in December 2003 when a team led by long-time KNU leader General Bo Mya went to Rangoon to negotiate. The resulting "Gentleman's Agreement" - a handshake to stop fighting - has been repeatedly violated by both sides. Although a KNU delegation went to Rangoon in October 2004 to continue the talks, negotiations ended abruptly with the sudden downfall of Burmese Prime Minister Khin Nyunt and subsequent purge of his military intelligence apparatus. A later offer by Rangoon in May 2005 to resume talks was deemed unacceptable by the KNU.

¶11. KNU Foreign Secretary David Taw confirmed that the organization remains interested in a cease fire agreement with Rangoon, "but after Khin Nyunt's departure we don't know who to

deal with." In the meantime, the KNU considers that the "Gentlemen's Agreement" achieved with the SPDC in 2004 remains in force, despite numerous skirmishes in the ensuing years.

#### The Christian Connection

¶12. A large number of Karen converted to Christianity in the 19th century due to American missionary efforts, educational opportunities and a traditional Karen legend that corresponded to Christian teachings. Among Karen leaders today, many are Christians, including most of the KNU executive committee and the Karen Refugee Committee.

¶13. Christian missionaries and aid workers in northern Thailand provide various kinds of support to the Karen on both sides of the border; the Chiang Mai-based Free Burma Rangers (FBR) assists IDPs in Burma and publicizes their plight through widely circulated email reports of Burmese atrocities. FBR staff confirm that these eyewitness accounts go to Congressional offices and British parliamentarians as well as to journalists, NGOs, and UN organizations. FBR photos and video footage have been used in reporting on Burma by international media organizations such as BBC, VOA, AP, and Swiss, German, and French TV.

¶14. Comment: Within Thailand's multi-ethnic border dissident community, the Karen play an active and highly visible role. By virtue of their numbers and long resistance to the Burmese central government, the Karen are central to refugee and exile issues in Thailand. The KNU in turn is central to most of the Karen. As with other exile groups, the KNU is struggling with problems of operating out of Thailand, which makes communication with villagers and colleagues inside Burma more difficult. Recent advances by the Burmese army on the small remaining territory controlled by the KNU in Karen State near the Thai border, as well as on other areas populated by ethnic Karen, has led to a surge in Karen IDPs and refugees and put further pressure on the KNU. A USG determination that the KNU is a terrorist organization would be used by the Burmese regime to justify continued and even more severe abuses against the Karen people.

¶15. This cable was coordinated with Embassy Rangoon.  
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